1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
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Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria

Chapter XVI

Death and Funeral Ceremonies

A. Hill Marias

The ordinary rule throughout the Abujhmar hills is to cremate the bodies of headmen and elders of influence and standing and of their wives, and to bury all others.

Except on the southern fringes of the hills, where the villages are influenced by contact with their Bison-horn Maria neighbours, the Hill Marias do not follow the Bison-horn custom of beating a drum from the roof of the house, which Russell and Hiralal predicate of all Marias. The custom is creeping into the hills from south of the Indrawati, and has for example already reached the Kutru Hill Maria villages of Lakka (Lanka) and Karangal; but there it is reserved for men of higher status. The drum used is the hill *turam* kettle-drum, and is usually one of those kept in the village dormitory; the village lads beat it continuously day and night from the death till the burial or cremation of the body.

News of the death is sent out to all the brother-clan and wife-clan relatives and friends of the deceased. The funeral is postponed for two or three days, to give them time to assemble. Then all the women gather in and around the house where the body is lying. A man is never left to die on a cot, but is lifted on to the ground as his end draws near; they say that their reason for this custom is simply that they do not want the dying man to fall off the cot in a last convulsion. Women are never allowed to sleep on a cot. They close the eyes of the corpse, and lift it on to a rough wicker-work bier, covering it over with a length of cloth. It is burned or buried with the clothes and jewellery that were on it at death. The women sit around the corpse and outside in the street, and break into loud keening for the dead.

For the last rites the body is not washed or otherwise prepared, but is left just as it was composed after death. Friends and relatives carry it out on the bier, the only person for whom it is taboo to touch or carry a body being the *waddai* clan-priest medium and his medium assistant (*leshi*). The bier heads the procession to the burial and cremation ground, and is followed by the remaining relatives and friends, the women still keening and beating their breasts.

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Where, as in Orcha and most of the surrounding villages of the Chhota Dongar *pargana*, *hetokal* menhirs are no longer erected, a cow or pig is nevertheless sacrificed in this way in the village on the night after the funeral at the heir's house, and portions of the flesh or the liver when cooked are placed under the cromlech at the base of the *hanal-gutta* post, or, if there is no cromlech, on the grave, while the tail, and sometimes also a lower leg, from hock to hoof, are fastened by a cord from an overhanging *saja* bough. The usual feast and dance then follow.

One reason for the abandonment of the custom of erecting menhirs may be that the clans which have abandoned it have in fairly recent times abandoned their traditional for their present clan-areas; for it was the rule that the menhir should always be erected in the village from which the dead man or his ancestors had originally come, not in the village at which he was living at the time of his death.

Treatment of abnormal deaths

A person who has killed himself, or who dies from cholera or small-pox, is not buried or cremated at the regular funeral ground, but in the forest at some distance from it. There had been no recent case in any village which I visited of a woman dying when pregnant or in child-birth, and no one could say what would be done in such a case. Persons killed by tigers or other wild animals must be burned, not buried, at the place where their remains are found, or to which they are brought for the inquest. They must never be brought into a village, for otherwise the dead man's *hanal* may bring the tiger there. The remains, if scattered, are collected and placed in a cloth brought from the dead man's house; but such bodies should be touched as little as possible. Logs are piled under the body where it lies and kindled, and anything found with the body or at the place where the tiger attacked the dead man is burnt with it; but no dancing dresses or other property are brought from his house to be burned with him, and no offerings of grain or *mahua* spirit are made at the grave. No *marma-kal* cairn and no *hetokal* menhir are set up for him; but there is nothing to prevent this being done for the victims of cholera or smallpox.

B. Bison-horn Marias

The true Bison-horn Marias, as distinguished from members of clans once Hill Maria in culture but now adopting Bison-horn customs, cremate all their dead except those who die from abnormal causes. When a man dies, his son-in-law is sent for, and on arrival climbs on to the roof of the house with a *dol* drum, which he beats

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for some time with a series of one long followed by two short beats to announce that a death has occurred in the house; he then climbs down, and continues this drumming on the ground until the relatives and friends of the dead man assemble, or until the body is taken out to be cremated. Sometimes they fire guns at intervals for the same purpose. Messengers are sent out to neighbouring villages to bid relatives to the funeral.

When all the men and women have assembled the body is taken out of the house and washed with a pot of water and anointed with a mixture of ground turmeric and oil. They then spread a cloth on a bier of bamboo wicker-work, lay the body on it, and spread a cloth over it. Each male relative who can afford it brings a cloth and similarly spreads it over the body. Four men then carry the bier on their shoulders to the cremation ground, followed by all the mourners, and men beating the dactylic funeral drum-beat. The pyre is made there, the body laid on it with head to the east and feet to the west, and covered over with fuel. Two men, generally two sons, or two sons-in-law, or a son and a son-in-law, then kindle the pyre at the head and the feet of the body respectively. As soon as the pyre is blazing fiercely the company leaves the cremation ground and returns to the dead man's house for food. The cremation ground is almost always on the side of the path or road opposite to the row of menhirs erected to commemorate the dead, which is known to the Bison-horn Marias as *wraskal*.

On the next day all go to the cremation ground to see whether the body has been completely reduced to ashes; if any portion remains unburnt, it is a sign that the death was due to the magic of some enemy. All condole with the members of the bereaved family and return to their houses.

On the next Saturday morning comes the erection of the *wraskal* menhir. There are *wraskal* with great numbers of menhirs almost everywhere in the Bison-horn country, and in most parts villagers continue to erect them for men, women and children whenever a death occurs.[1] On the Jagdalpur side, however, and around Pakhar, though every village has its *wraskal*, new menhirs are seldom set up in these days, the reason given being always that the ceremony is too expensive. It is indeed expensive, for if properly done it involves the killing of at least one, and possibly two cows, a pig or two, and the provision of three or four *khandi* of grain—*kuthi*, *urad*, *mung* and rice—and an adequate supply of *mahua* spirit and *landa*. But expense is not taken into account at weddings, where open house is kept for a thousand guests if need be. The real reason is that these Bison-horn Marias are in close contact with Hinduism with its veneration of the cow; and as they raise

[1] [see cat. 116, p. 426. — Ed.]